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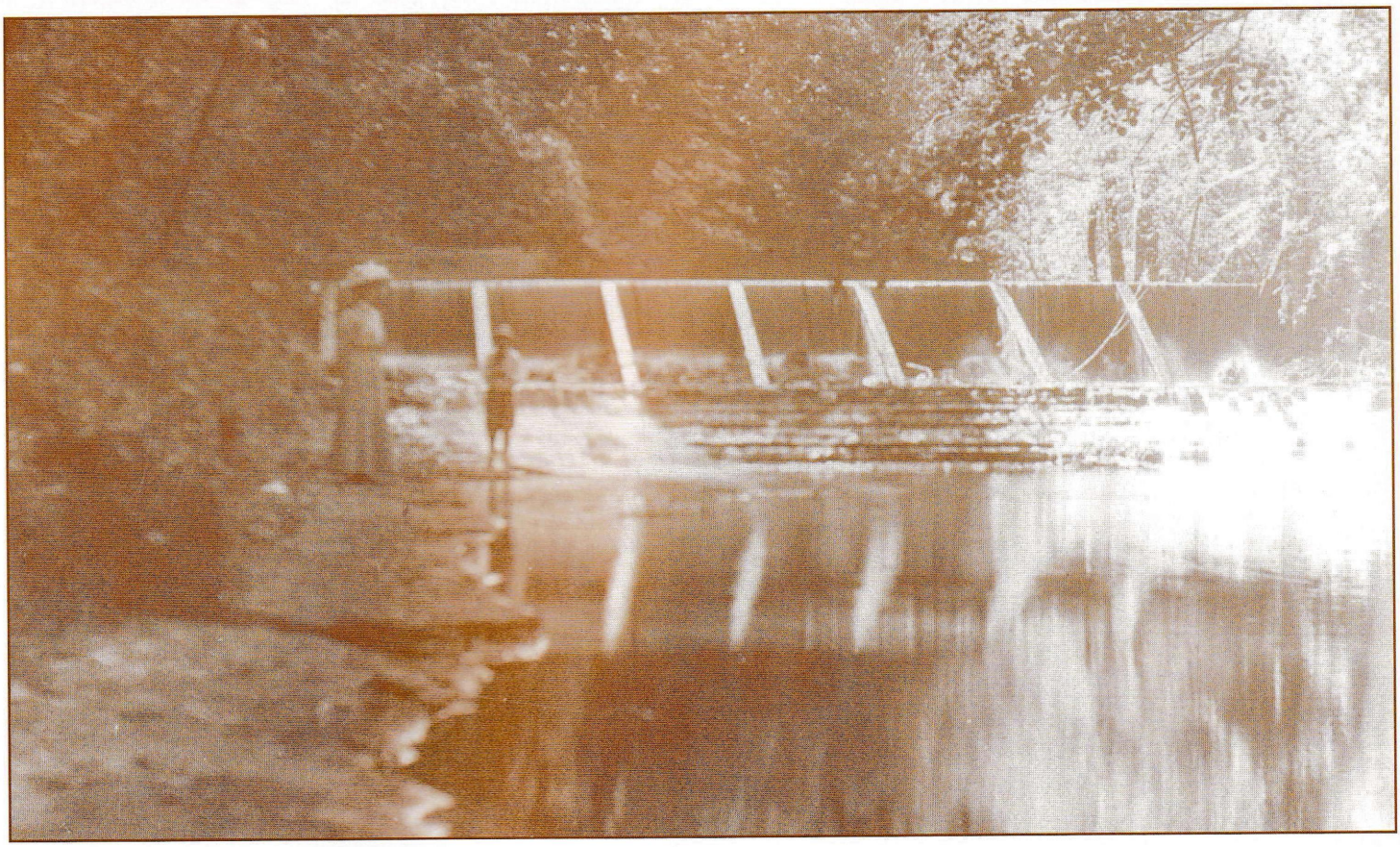
EARLY LODI LAKE

by Nancy Lea Schmer

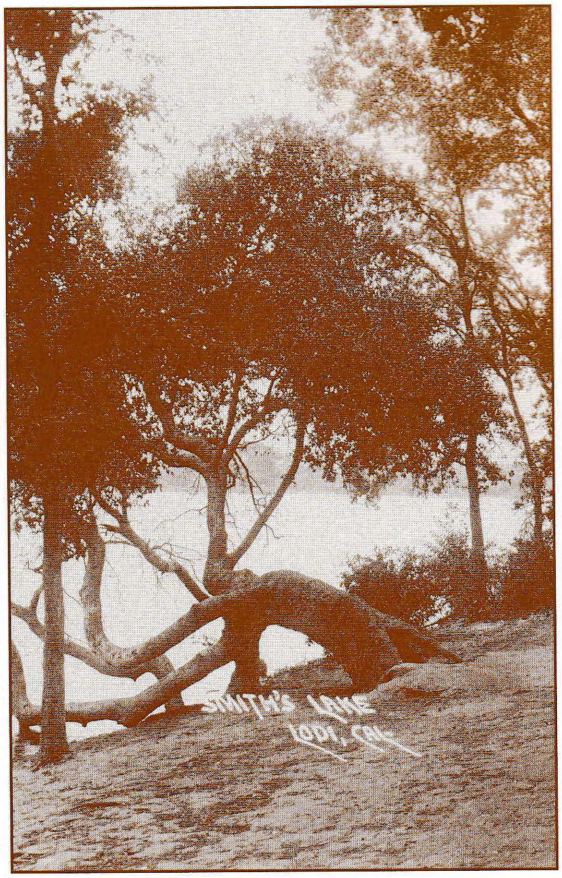
Long before Lodi Lake Park was developed, the unassuming river bottom was covered in a thicket of tree and shrub growth. The lake, or body of water, formed during floods when the bottomland filled with overflow from the adjacent Mokelumne River, and disappeared when the excess water drained away. The river was filled with salmon and trout, and the riverbank was home to many animals including beavers, otters, raccoons, deer, rabbits, and birds of all kinds. Vast herds of elk and deer roamed the grasslands. There were also a lot of grizzly bears.

The Mokelumne River watershed, or drainage, originates among the snow clad, pine covered peaks of the Sierra Nevada Mountains in Alpine County at an elevation of about 9,000 feet above sea level. The runoff water crosses granite and travels down deep canyons with steep sides. Most of this highly pure and low mineral content water is the result of melting snow and high altitude storms.

▲ *Lodi Lake Beach, c. 1948, Marilyn Lea, 3rd from left on towel in foreground, and classmates.*



▲ *Maurice and Nellie Hill at the Woodbridge Dam, newly built at the time of this photo, 1910.*



▲ *Smith's Lake, circa 1920.*

The first human inhabitants of our region were the Plains Miwok Indians. Three separate groups of Plains Miwok-the Mokelkos, Lalas, and Machacos-made their homes along the Mokelumne. The Miwok village of Mokel, sometimes spelled Muk-kel, settled along the lower river, west of Lockeford. In the Miwok language Mokel means "village" and "umni" means people, thus Mokelumne means "village of the people".

A number of variations on the spelling of Mokelumne are found in the history records. They include Muquelemnes, Moquelomos, Moquelumne, and Mokellemos.

The Miwok were a hunting and food-gathering people. One source stated their populace numbered approximately 3,000. Acorns supplied 60 to 80 percent of their diet. They followed their food supply and more agreeable weather, but typically lived their entire lives within a region of 20 to 30 miles. They displayed extremely resourceful methods of surviving off the land and were cunning hunters.

In the early 1840's, French Canadian fur trappers from the Hudson Bay Company outpost in French Camp came to work the Mokelumne River near Woodbridge. They built a log cabin and returned for a number of years to trap the beaver along the river. They only trapped in the winter months when the beaver furs were thickest.

On March 25, 1844, John Charles Fremont and his party camped on the Mokelumne River between Lodi and Lockeford. This was Fremont's second westward expedition. Christopher (Kit) Carson acted as guide for the group.

▲ *Smith's Lake, circa 1914. Helen Henderson (oar to right), Maurice Hill, Marian Schuh (oar to left), Wilma Clark.*

Fremont wrote in his journal, "we...halted in a beautiful bottom at the ford of the Rio de los Mukelumnes. The bottoms of the stream are broad, rich, and extremely fertile; and the uplands are shaded with oak groves."

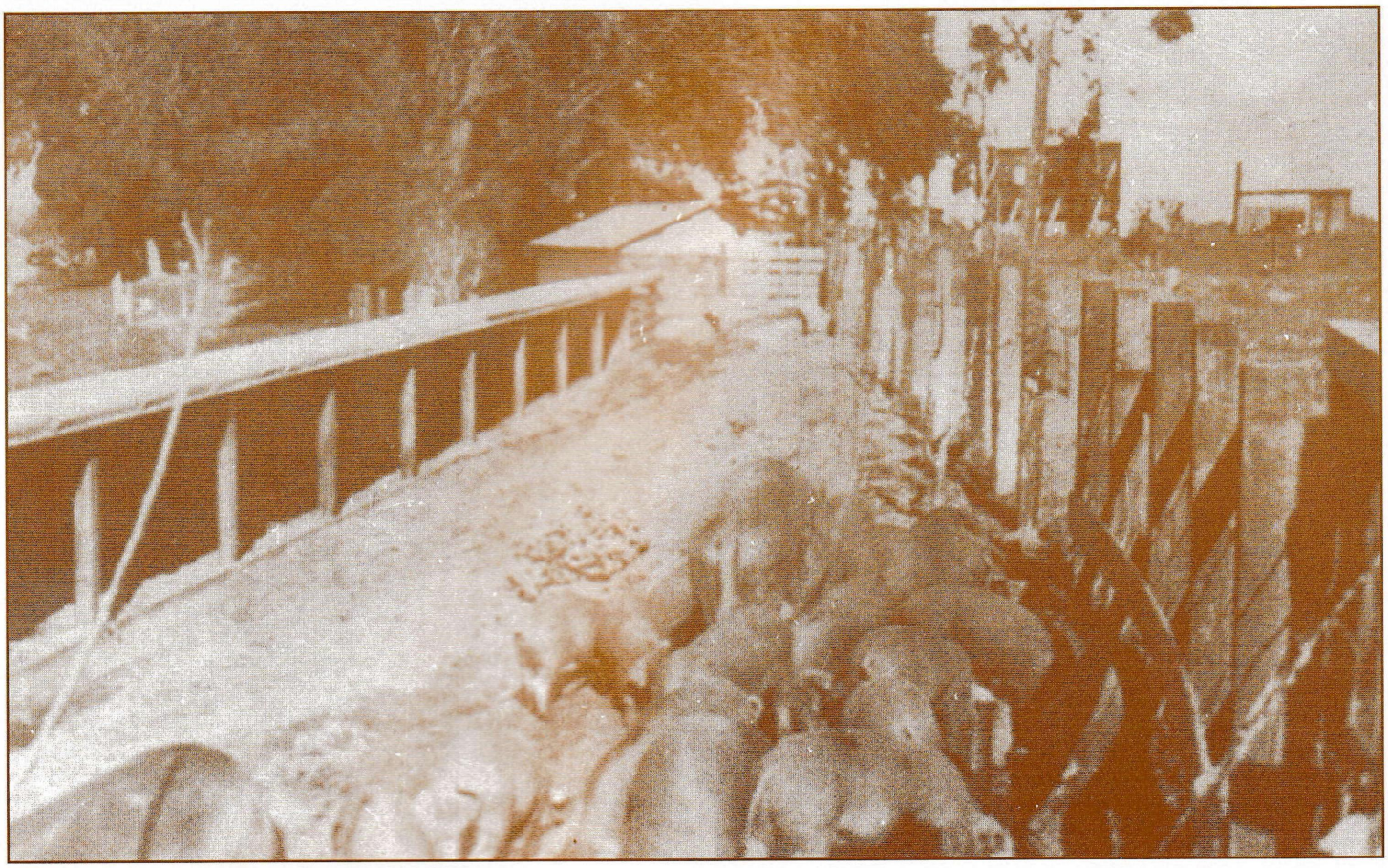
In 1850, California became a state and brothers James P. & Roswell C. Sargent settled near the future village of Woodbridge. They were among the first, along with George W. Emerson, to farm in this area. They tried planting potatoes in the river bottom but the crop was a failure. Barley was more successful, the yield being about 10 bushels to the acre. Within 2 years, the Sargent brothers sold their ranch to Jeremiah H. Woods and Captain Alexander McQueen.

Jeremiah Woods, born in Virginia, quickly built a ferry boat and established "Wood's Ferry." He had plans for a new road from Stockton to Sacramento by way of his new ferry crossing. A year later, in 1853, San Joaquin County declared the Lower Sacramento a public road. Woods offered free passage to freight and stage lines.

In 1858, Woods built a toll bridge to replace the ferry. In 1859, the town was surveyed and named Woodbridge. Lots were sold for $400.00 to $500.00. The town and area was growing at a fast rate as well as many large farms. Orchards of fruit trees were being planted and there were vast fields of wheat. In 1860, there was a reference to a picnic at McQueen's Pond. This is the earliest mention of our modern day Lodi Lake.

In 1875, Charles Edward Smith purchased 80 acres from Captain McQueen. Smith, born in Kennebunk Port, Maine, came west by ox wagon in 1853. His wife, Isabelle May (Robertson) Smith, was born near Toronto, Canada and sailed to the west coast at about the same time via the Panama route. Smith planted onions and flax, which he sold at local markets. After several years, he sold the ranch and moved to Escalon, where he farmed for 7 years.

In 1875, the legislature legalized the building of irrigation systems by private companies providing these did not interfere with riparian rights already in existence. Locally, the Mokelumne Ditch and Irrigation Company was incorporated in December 1875 with Sylvester V. Tredway as President, David Kettelman as Treasurer, James E. Spencer as Secretary; R.C. Sargent, James A. Ellison, C.R. Ralph as Board of Directors, and G.C. Holman as Chief Engineer. The company claims 100,000 inches of the Mokelumne River water can be distributed by canals as far as the line of gravitation will take it. Plans were made to build a solid rock dam at Westmoreland in



▲ *Smith's Lake in the 1920's, pigs on future Lodi Lake beach area.*

Calaveras County, between what is now Pardee and Comanche Dams.

In 1880, the talk in the county was of the need for irrigation because there was not enough rainfall during the summer months. People used buckets to water by hand and then pumps were used to bring the water up from wells. Windmills helped the farmers, but sometimes the wind died down and the windmill didn't turn for weeks.

Charles Smith returned to this area and bought back the same property he had sold 7 years earlier. Mr. Smith cleared most of the 80 acres and planted vineyard. In 1885, he built a home for his wife and their 4 children.

In 1886, Byron Beckwith posted notice in New Hope (Thornton) and Woodbridge claiming 150,000 cubic inches per second of Mokelumne River. He posted a second claim at Woodbridge for an additional 150,000 inches under four inch pressure. Later, Beckwith hired A.T. Covell to engineer the canal system for the Woodbridge Canal & Irrigation Company. Plans included a timber dam at Woodbridge, just north of the headgate. In 1889, the Woodbridge Canal & Irrigation Company was incorporated. Two years later, in 1891, 24 miles of canals and a wooden dam were completed.

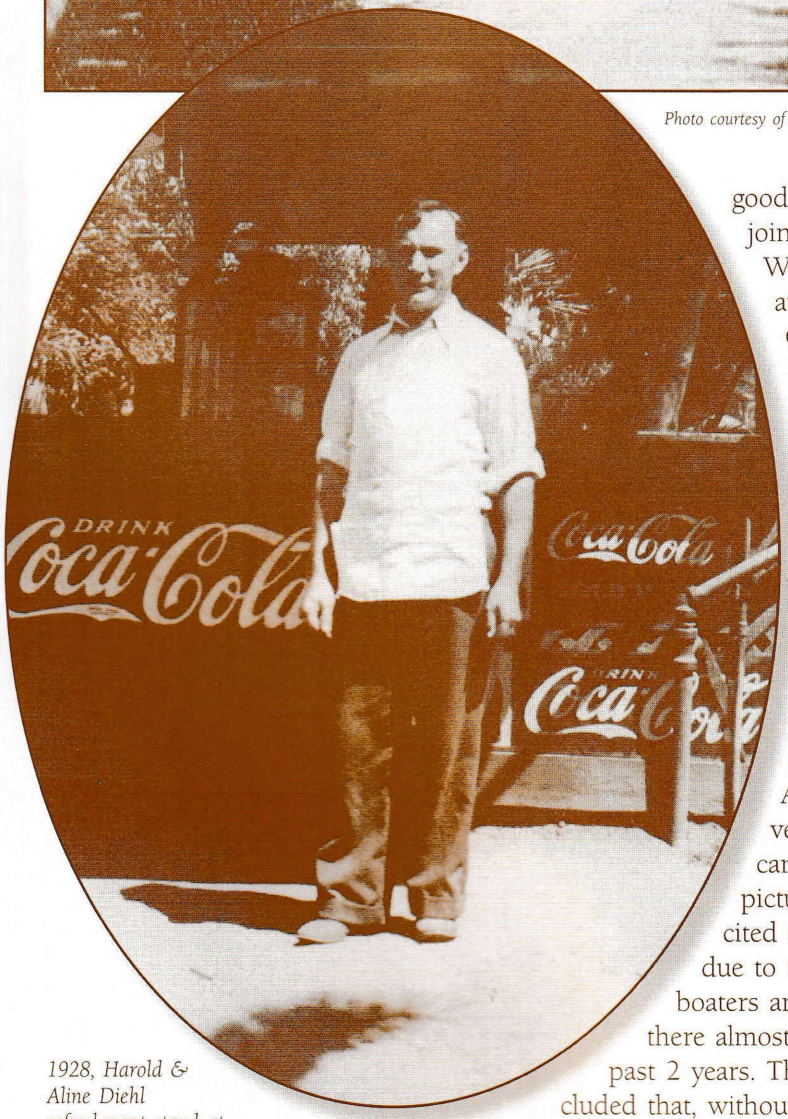
With the dam in place, the low-lying pond soon became known as Smith's Lake, so named by Charles Smith's youngest child, daughter Estella. Born in 1872, Estella attended grammar school in Woodbridge and graduated in 1893 from the San Joaquin Valley College located in Woodbridge.

The broad lake, surrounded by huge California live oaks, was an invitation to rowing and outdoor gatherings. Estella had a big photo of the lake that showed a favorite tree, a mammoth oak, under which a little club she belonged to held many meetings.

Charles E. Smith died in 1902, at the age of 72 years. His wife, Isabelle, had died 2 years earlier, at the age of 58 years. Estella took over the operation of the vineyard. Estella Smith was progressive in her farming methods and could hitch up a team "just right quick." She had 3 horses all her own that she broke to ride and drive, and was partial to a frisky pony whose lively hooves were known even at a distance by almost everybody. Estella helped her 2 brothers and sister raise their families and maintained that she was always too busy to get married and raise her own family. She was also an active member of the old Woodbridge Presbyterian Church and the Woodbridge Chapters of Eastern Star and Rebekah Lodge. And being a

Photo courtesy of Harold T. Stearns

March 1928, the Lodi-Woodbridge Highway flood. ▲ (Turner Road)



1928, Harold & Aline Diehl refreshment stand at Smith Lake. Al Inman Photo ▲

good golfer, Estella joined the Woodbridge Golf and Country Club when it was built in 1924.

On July 1, 1907, the Stockton Daily Independent carried a story about local capitalists making a summer resort out of Smith's Lake. Although this venture never came to pass, the picturesque lake was cited as an ideal spot due to the number of boaters and swimmers there almost daily for the past 2 years. The article concluded that, without a doubt by next summer, a splendid hotel with beautiful gardens surrounding it will be erected on the banks of this pretty little lake and Lodi will be recognized as a resort and a center for Tokay grapes.

In 1910, the land around Smith's Lake changed in appearance and in ownership. That year, the Woodbridge Irrigation District built the $40,000.00 concrete Woodbridge dam, which we have today. The Smith family's hold on the land also changed that year. Estella Smith sold some of her property to a Stockton bank and a Mr. Potter for promotional purposes. Potter was going to develop the land, but his plans fell through.

In 1911, much interest developed in dredging the Mokelumne River downstream from the Woodbridge dam, thereby making the waterway navigable to San Francisco. Judge Marion DeVries was one of the leaders of this cause. Farmers wanted to broaden, straighten, and deepen the

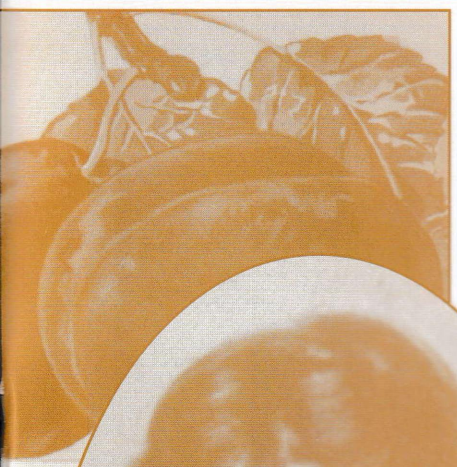
▲ *This is an original label showing the Louis Mason home printed between 1920-1930. It was never pasted on the end of a wooden crate. Crop damages due to freeze or drought caused the grower to pack less fruit than expected, resulting in extra labels that were stored in old packing houses.*

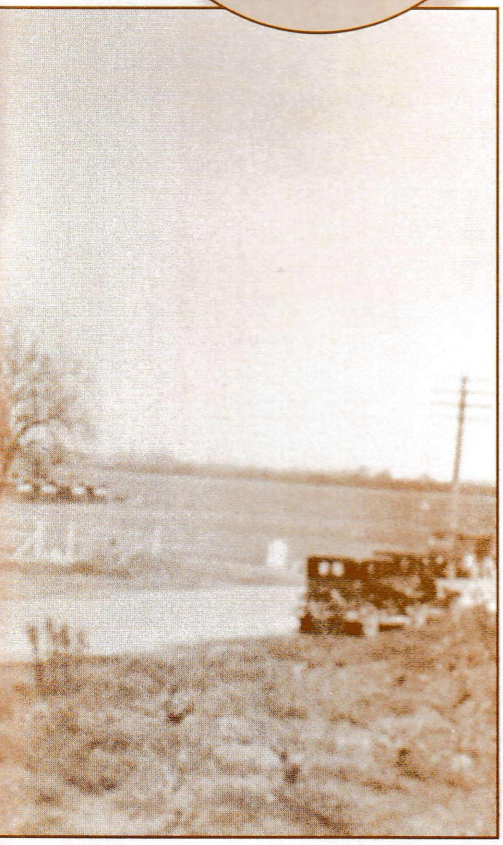
Helen Smith, Tokay cl
of 1917 is the autho
the poem at ri

▲ *Municipal Lake Park, Lodi, California.*

▲ *Municipal Lake Park, Lodi, California, canoe rack on the south side of the lake.*

Turner (Woodbridge Road) at Smith's Lake. Louis Mason's
station in front of the lake when Turner Road was known
▼ *Woodbridge Road.*





Smith's Lake

PRIZE POEM

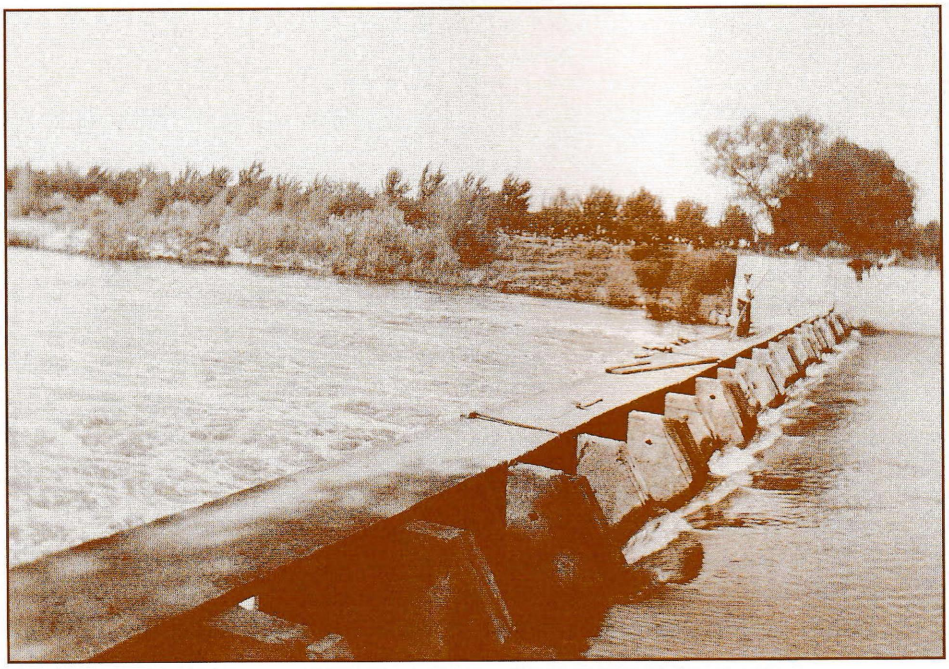
HELEN M. SMITH, '17

Memory mellows in its golden haze
The long-gone half-remembered yesterdays;
And thoughts and words, or actions sudden play
Are crystallized along the vistaed way.
How many happy visions rise to take
Me back the golden road to this dear lake!
My childhood's wonderland, with hidden haunt
Of awesome beast; where wild blackberries flaunt
Just out of reach above the grass-choked pool.
The spots explored and named, where shadows cool,
And Ghost Creek's winding aisle of mystery,
Luring in rich, romantic history
Call back my thought into the glowing past.
The picnic days; the fishing lines outcast;
Sweet scent of button-willow, water-lily;
The water spiders skipping, willy nilly;
The rippling willows and the rippling waves;
The twisted oak that, fallen forward, laves
Its barren boughs in waters cool and clear;
Wild roses and wild peas entwining near;
The fringing grasses at the water's brink,
The mint-edged shallows where the wild birds drink;
The gleaming lights of gorgeous green and gold
Reflected brighter where the waters hold
The glowing colors molten; the glint
Of sun-shafts silvered in the willow's tint;
A smiling sky of deepest, dreamy blue
That o'er the tender trees her wind-wand drew
In sweetest symphony; the great crane's sweep
In lazy flight to shallow strands where sleep
The warm waves in the sunlight's soft'ning ray;
The hoot of owl in flight at close of day,
With squawker's raucous cry; the wondrous lights
Of sunset;—all the dear familiar sights
And sounds that memory has stored away
To treasure on some sadder, later day—
Revisioned, gain an added charm thru years,
A touch of romance glimpsed thru tender tears.

▲ *Boat races at Lodi Lake, held in conjunction with the Grape Festival, September 1934. Scene is looking west at beach area.*

river. The Mokelumne was called the "crookedest river in California." At one place, the river travels 1,000 feet, but in reality progresses only 150 feet.

About this time, Louis T. Mason bought 45 acres of what is now a major part of today's Lodi Lake Park from another landowner around the lake. Six years later, Mason bought Potter's land. Mason farmed the land and made improvements. In 1915, he built his home that the Mason family called "Lake Home." The Mason Fruit Company shipped fruit with the colorful "Lake Home" label showing the grand home beside the lake. This home still stands on the south side of Turner Road, at the corner of Loma Drive, just opposite the lake entrance. At one time, Mason hoped to build a tunnel underneath Turner Road to the lake, but the cost was prohibitive.



▲ *May 3, 1928; flood year at Woodbridge Dam.*

In 1920, Mr. Mason built a dance floor on the south side of the lake, just west of where the Discovery Center stands today. Roy Steward used to run a taxi, an old Overland car, to the Dance Hall, as it was called around Lodi, charging 10 cents per person. A barn was also built and, after the City acquired the park, moved next to the Lake to serve as a boat and storehouse.

For several years, a person could drive all the way around the lake. After the bridges, connecting the "island" on the north side of the lake to land, washed out in the early 1920's, the island was accessed only by boat. Louis Mason raised horses and pigs where the beach is today. The horses used to swim across the lake to the island. The Mason children would go over and bring them back because the Masons swam on the island side and they didn't want the horses over there.

In 1924, the present Woodbridge Irrigation District was formed. The district directors decided to keep more water in storage behind the dam, so the lake got larger. Mason allowed people to use Smith's Lake, as it was still known, for recreational

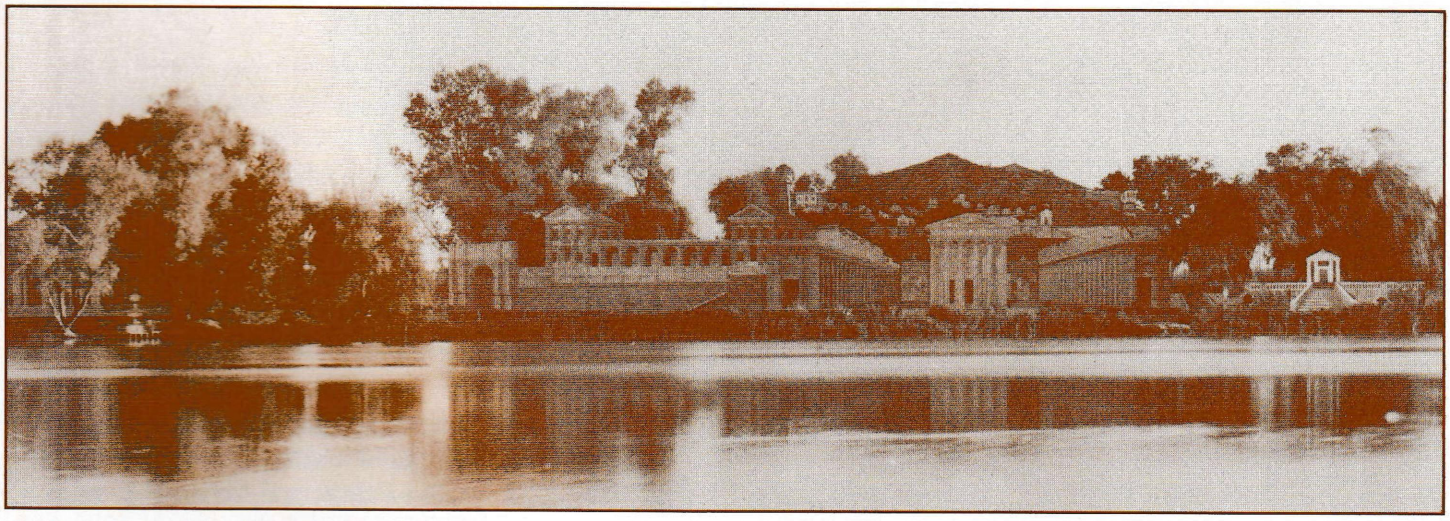
▲ *Lodi Lake on the Fourth of July, 1941; note people on almost sunk raft in upper right.*

purposes. Gypsies camped by the west side of the lake.

The following year, Mr. Mason purchased an interest in an adjoining piece of property, partnering with Mrs. Stella C. Lovegrove of San Francisco. English walnut trees were planted on the south side of the lake, a few of which remain today. Mason ran a gas station on the north side of Turner Road near the lake entrance. At that time, the roadway was closer to the lake.

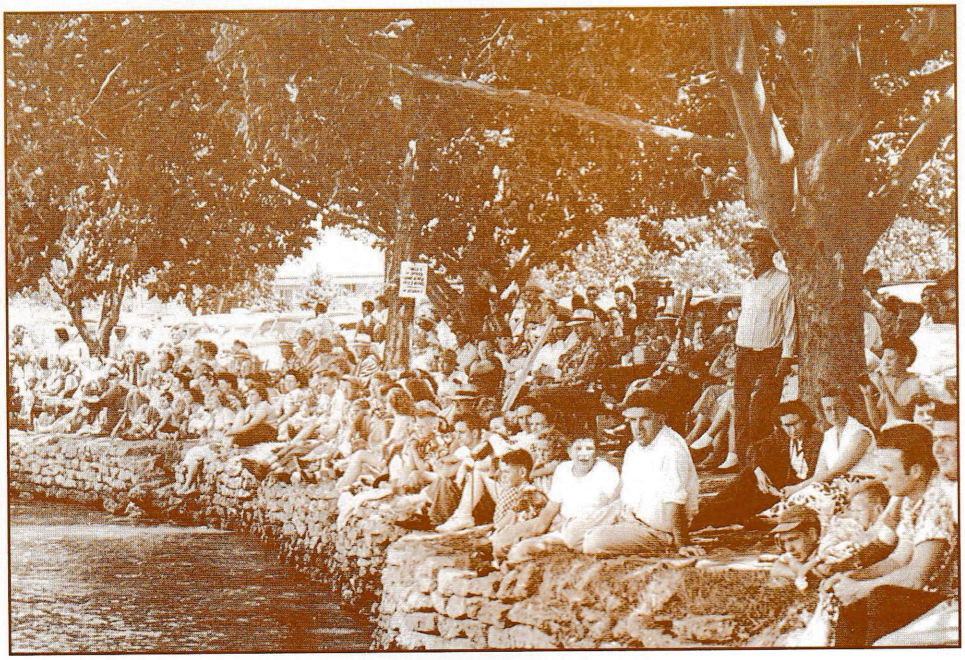
On December 12, 1927, Louis Mason closed Smith's Lake to the public. Mason stated that his action was taken because public liability insurance, to cover possible accidents, costs more than profits from the recreational operation. The entire property has been fenced and will be devoted to livestock pasturage. The island in the lake, containing between 15 to 20 acres, is now occupied by 70 hogs. Mr. Mason also announced that the land was for sale. He added that should livestock raising prove profitable, however, the property would be taken off the market.

On March 26, 1928, flooding from the Mokelumne River threatened Smith's Lake and Woodbridge. Scores of men were pressed into service to



▲ *Reproduction of the City of Pompei and Mt. Vesuvius built on the north side of Lodi Lake for the Grape Festival, September 1937.*

▲ *A typical swim day at Lodi Lake in 1941.*



▲ *Lodi Lake boat races.*

build and strengthen the levees from Mason's home westward to Woodbridge. Damages were figured at $1,500.00.

Mason wrote an open letter to the public on April 2, 1928 calling attention to the danger from bottling the Mokelumne River at Woodbridge. Mason claimed that floodwaters endangered the Smith Lake levee, which protects thousands of acres of rich vineyard land and hundreds of homes.

The officers of the Woodbridge Irrigation District responded quickly and within days warned Mason that they would file a lawsuit against him for lowering the levees during his farming activities. The WID also claimed that Mason cut into the levees to allow river water to irrigate his fields.

The dispute played out in the local newspapers for days, with charges and counter-charges being made by both parties. In the end, no lawsuit was filed and Louis Mason publicly reaffirmed that, due to liability concerns, he was closing the lake to the public.

In 1929, Pardee Dam was completed by the East Bay Municipal Utilities District. Starting in the previous year, the Woodbridge Irrigation District, the City of Lodi, and approximately 200 land owners filed multiple lawsuits in an attempt to maintain their riparian rights. Most of the suits were settled in the 1930's with agreements on flow, amounts of water, and the amount to be appropriated.

Louis Mason did open his lake to the public for special events. Outboard motor boat races were held at Smith's Lake on July 18, 1931. The accompanying newspaper article stated, "some effort should be made, either through public or private enterprise, to develop this property... recreation is recognized as necessary to the health and happiness of the people."

A year later, Mason entered into a deal for lease and purchase of the lake area to Irving Bowen and J.B. Jory for $10,000.00 with only $500.00 as a down payment. A resort was started with some building and improvements under the name of Loma Lake Park. One of the events held was a Regatta on July 23, 1933, sponsored by The Lodi Fleet.

Bowen and Jory, however, had trouble making the payments and were turned down for a loan because the area flooded. In November 1933, Mason foreclosed on the Loma Lake Resort and started acquiring more land around the lake. He bought land east and north of the lake from Margery Pischel for $8,000.00.

In 1934, the Dance Hall was torn down and the seasoned timber used to build a home for the newly married George and Vivian Hughes, Mason's son-in-law and daughter.

1950 flood at Lodi Lake Park, looking east at Laurel Avenue. ▲

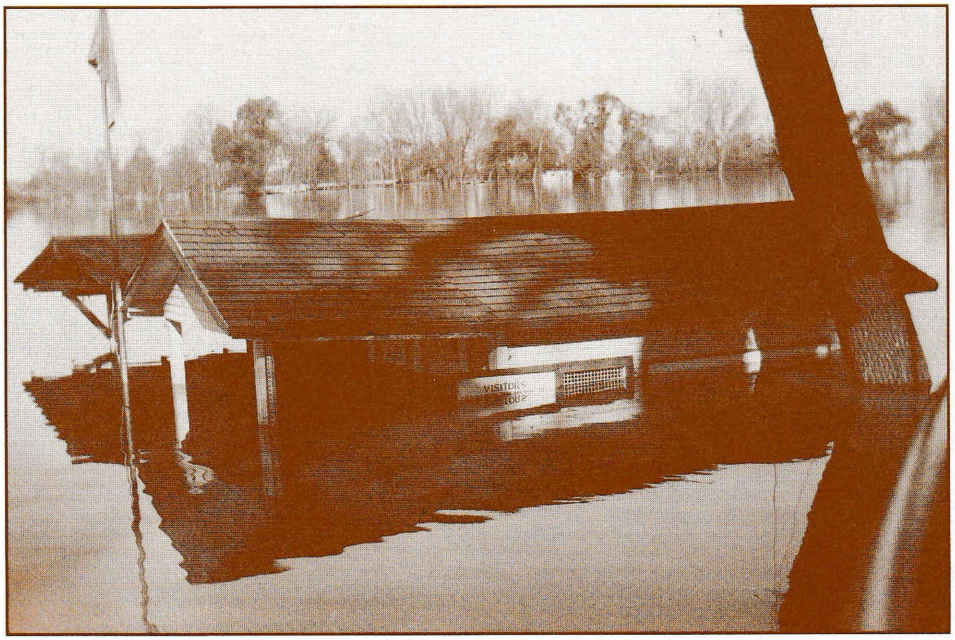
On April 17, 1934, Louis Mason and his real estate agent, Louis H. Rinn, offered to sell Smith's Lake and surrounding land to the City of Lodi. Mason's price of $5,000.00 was available only if the City will use it as a municipal recreational park. This was a generous offer by Mason because he had spent more than $20,000.00 developing the property. Mason offered to finance the City's purchase himself if there was no cash available at this time and said, "I am a believer in public parks and I think the lake would make a splendid park now and in the future."

On May 9, 1934, the City of Lodi received a letter from Irving Bowen claiming interest in the property and further claimed that he has filed a lien and suit against Mr. Mason. However, Mason had insurable title and proceeded to deed title to the City on May 21, 1934. The final purchase price was $7,924.39. City Clerk John F. Blakely later placed the value of the lake and land at more than $31,000.00.

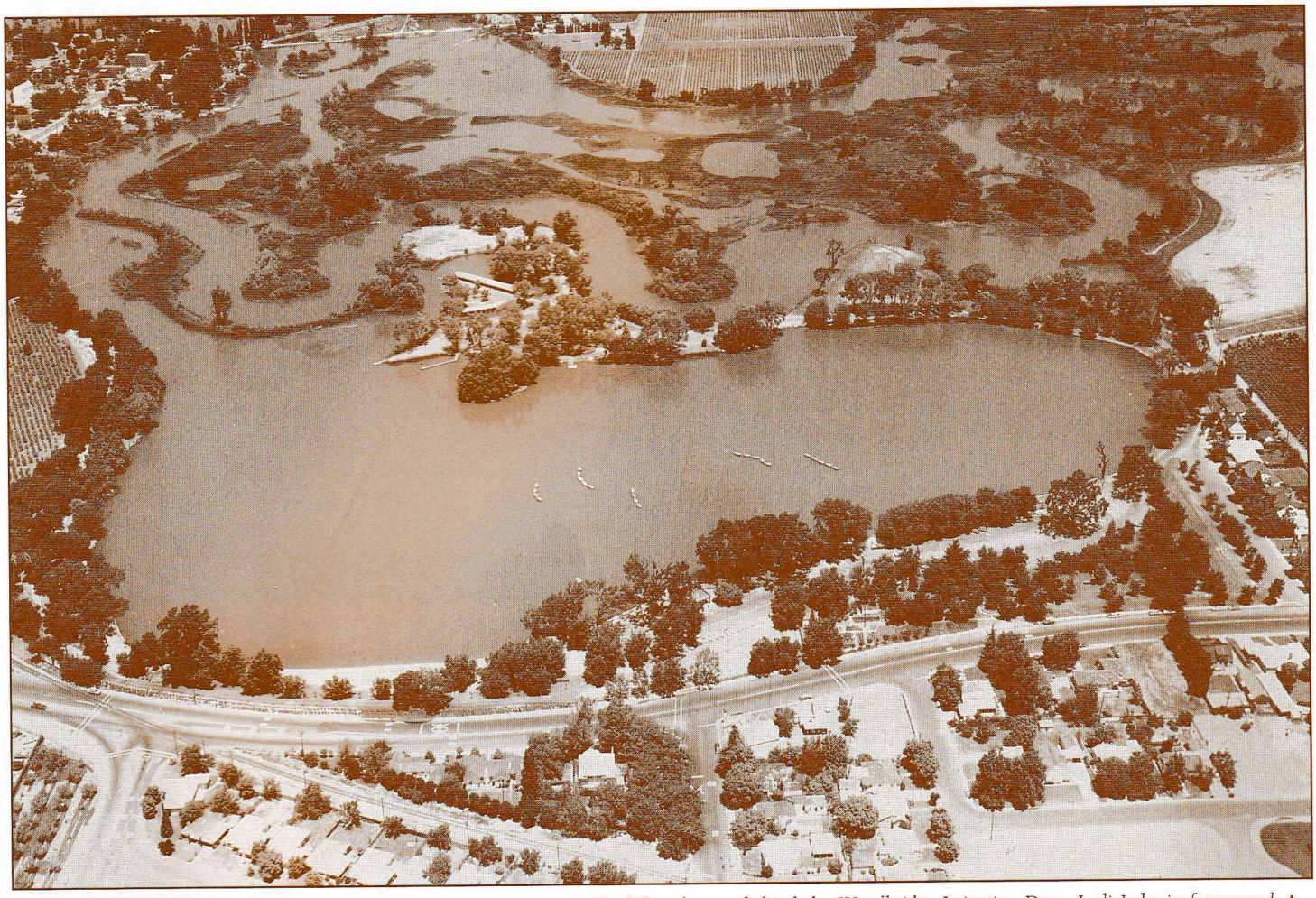
Mayor George M. Steele announced that Smith's Lake would be open to the citizens of Lodi on Sunday morning, May 27, 1934. The approximately 45 acres included a walnut orchard, dike, pier, 6 boats, sanitary facilities, and other structures. W.G. Hurrle was named park superintendent.

The philanthropic Mason made additional gifts to the City in later years. In 1936 and 1937, Mason designated more land to the City. In 1937, Estella Smith sold her remaining land on the southwest side of the lake to the City. In 1943, Mason gave to Lodi his remaining land on the east and north sides of the lake.

On Sunday evening, September 19, 1937, the Lodi Grape and Wine Festival came to a close on the waters of Lodi Municipal Lake Park, reproducing the historic tale of the destruction of Pompei by the eruption of Mt. Vesuvius in 79 A.D. Before the mountain erupted in a blaze of fireworks and lighting effects,



▲ *Boathouse at Lodi Lake Park, December 9, 1950.*



The lake of water behind the Woodbridge Irrigation Dam, Lodi Lake in foreground and Knights Lane, upper right. ▲

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there was a procession of magnificently decorated, illuminated floats. The production was designed and executed by Leon Bayard DeVolo of Hollywood.

In 1948, it was announced that Lodi Lake Park might be annexed into the State Park system. The intention was to expand the park area to both sides of the river from the WID dam to Cherokee Lane. The lake's current size of almost 60 acres would increase to over 495 acres. On April 6, 1955, the Lodi City Council voted to turn the park over to the State. On February 25, 1957, the City was notified by letter that the State was abandoning plans to develop Lodi Lake Park into a state recreation area. Returned with the letter was the City's deed to the park.

Louis T. Mason's significant contribution to the citizens of Lodi was marked only by a simple slab of cement that bore his name. This slab, once in the grass on the levee east of the lake entrance, was pulled out of the ground some time ago.

While this piece contains the early history of the beautiful lake and wilderness area that is now called the jewel of Lodi, there will certainly be more to come.

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